

HISTORY OF THE BIGHORN RIVER FISHERY

The history of the current Bighorn River fishery started in the early 1960s when plans were finalized to construct a 525 foot high concrete dam across the Bighorn River at the lower end of the spectacular Bighorn Canyon. Closing of Yellowtail Dam in October 1965 changed this silty warmwater stream into a world renowned tailwater trout fishery. The final report on the proposed "Yellowtail Unit", completed in 1962, predicted that Yellowtail Dam would improve the fishery in the river below the proposed dam. Little did anyone realize how big this change would be.

FWP began planting rainbow trout into the Bighorn River in 1966. Rainbow plants continued on an annual basis until 1973, then intermittently until 1983 in the upper river, and 1989 in the river near Hardin. Brown trout were never planted, but began to develop a wild population on their own shortly after the dam was closed. The trout grew rapidly in the Bighorn and the river gained a reputation for producing trophy fish. A 1965 FWP survey estimated less than 500 angler days of fishing were spent on the entire 84 miles of river downstream of Yellowtail Dam. By 1973, fishing pressure on the upper 12 miles of river above Bighorn Fishing Access Site (FAS) had grown to 13,000 angler days, roughly the same intensity of angler use being experienced on the Madison River.

Angling on the Bighorn River came to an end in 1975 when the Crow tribe passed a resolution closing the entire reservation to hunting, fishing and trapping to all but tribal members. This started a long series of legal battles in which numerous sportsman organizations joined together to fight for the Bighorn. The fate of the Bighorn River fishery was finally decided in March 1981 when the Supreme Court ruled that the Bighorn River was a navigable stream, and that the bed and banks of the river belonged to the state of Montana.

The Bighorn River was finally reopened to anglers on August 20, 1981, but not without some conflicts. Most anglers who were excited about trying their luck on the Bighorn on this "opening day" were turned around by a large group of Crow Indians who had set up barricades to block angler access. At least three separate incidents were reported where shots were fired near anglers on the river during the first few weeks the river was open. Once these conflicts settled down, angling pressure on the Bighorn picked up where it had left off in 1975. Angler success was excellent on this previously lightly fished population, and many trophy sized fish were caught. Through the early to mid-1980s fishing regulations on the Bighorn were changed several times while FWP tried to develop proper management practices for this new fishery.

With the reopening of the river, FWP began annual electrofishing to monitor fish populations. A mark/recapture estimate in the fall of 1981, on the upper river, found 2,218 age 1 and older brown trout per mile. Rainbow numbers were low and no estimate was obtained this first year. Good flow conditions in the early 1980s in this new coldwater stream really helped the Bighorn trout populations expand. The trout population in the upper river reached a peak in 1987 of around 9,900 brown trout and 1,000 rainbow trout per mile. Poor flow conditions in the late 1980s and early 1990s resulted in a significant drop in Bighorn River trout numbers. The trout population in the upper river reached a low of around 3,900 trout per mile in 1995 before the effects of better flows took over. With the improved flow conditions experienced through the

remainder of the decade, trout populations in the Bighorn fluctuated between about 4,000 and 7,500 trout per mile, with a growing part of this population being made up of rainbow trout.

As the fish populations increased, the Bighorn's reputation as one of the best trout streams in the world also increased. The Bighorn River began to draw nonresident anglers from around the world to compete with the many resident anglers who were already using the river. The big increase in interest in fly fishing in the early 1990s added to this influx of new anglers. As angler use continued to increase, many resident anglers quit going to the Bighorn because they did not want to fight the crowds. A creel census conducted on the Bighorn in 1982 - 1983 found that nonresident anglers accounted for 34% of the anglers using the river. Forty nine percent of these anglers fished strictly with flies. A similar creel study in 1992 - 1993 found that 74% of the anglers on the Bighorn were nonresidents, and 88% of Bighorn anglers fished exclusively with flies. Despite a feeling by many of the anglers contacted in 1992 - 1993 that the Bighorn was becoming too crowded, the number of anglers using the river continued to grow. The latest statewide angling pressure estimate for the Bighorn River estimated there were 91,909 angler days of use on the upper 12 miles of river between March 1997 and February 1998! An additional 21,514 angler days of use were reported for the river downstream of Bighorn FAS.

The future of the Bighorn fishery is not at all certain as we head into the next millennium. So far whirling disease has not been discovered in the Bighorn River, but whirling disease has the potential to devastate this fishery if it becomes established. Ongoing efforts to develop use regulations for the Big Hole Drainage will probably be carried over to the Bighorn River in coming years. And negotiations are currently going on to finalize a water compact with the Crow Tribe which would include the water in the Bighorn Drainage. Flow conditions seem to be the single most important factor that controls the Bighorn River fishery. The amount of water these compact negotiations provide for fisheries flows will be critical to the Bighorn River fishery well into the next century.